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The use of final particle “yo” in Japanese male-male conversations

Introduction

Final particles are an important aspect in Japanese language. As one type of evidentials, final particles allows speaker to show “the attitudes, feelings, judgments or commitments concerning the message”(Ohta, 1991).

One of the most common final particles in Japanese is “yo”. There have been several studies concerning the function of “yo” in Japanese conversations. According to “information state” theory by Kamio in 1990, “yo” implies that the information is in the speaker’s territory rather than the addressee’s, which means the speaker is the source of the information and thus has more knowledge and expertise regarding to the content of conversation. According to the “Dialogue Function” theory, “yo” is used by the speaker, in order to make sure that the addressee has received and understood the information, so the speaker can continue the dialogue. In order to confirm understanding, an acknowledgement response is usually expected from the addressee(Katagiri, 2007). The third theory argues that use of “yo” focuses more on emphasizing different opinions the speaker has regarding to information offered by the addressee, or requesting the addressee to do certain changes to his/her behavior(Nakazaki, 2005).

In all the three theories, “yo” marks the different attitudes on the same issue between the speaker and the addressee, and the speaker usually uses it to request certain response. In another word, “yo” generally indicates disagreement and request. Based on the concept of “preferred turn-shape”, people use preferred turn shapes in conversations to promote solidarity with each other, and agreement and offer are preferred over disagreement and request(Pillet-Shore, 2017). Consequently “yo” may potentially become a marker of dispreferred turn shape and leads to potential Face Threatening Acts(FTAs), such as imposing on the addressee or presenting conflicting ideas(Hayashi, 2000).

Based on the fact that “yo” is a frequently-used final particles in Japanese conversation, yet indicating dispreferred actions, this paper will analyze the function of final particle “yo”, and factors that may affect the use of “yo” in order to avoid FTAs if there is any. The analysis will focus on Japanese male-male conversations, based on data from a Japanese comedy variety show.

Methodology

The data used in this analysis is a transcription of a 10-minute excerpt from a Japanese comedy variety show called “Shabekuri 007”. The excerpt was first aired on April 20th, 2020, under quarantine due to the COVID-19 situation. All the 7 hosts in this variety show are male comedians in their 40s. In this excerpt, the leading host is calling the other hosts, discussing thoughts on the next show and their life during quarantine imposed by Japanese government because of COVID-19. The other 6 hosts did not expect they would receive such a phone call from the leading host, so their conversations can be considered as unscripted and natural. The transcription is divided into 6 parts based on which host the leading host is talking with. All the “yo”’s used in their conversations are analyzed and categorized. The frequency of “yo” used in each part is calculated as total number of “yo”’s used divided by total number of turns in that part of conversation. The frequency is shown as below:

Table 1:

The Caller: Ueda (U)					
Call recipient	Arita (A)	Ken (K)	Taizō (T)	Jun (J)	Fukuda (F)
Frequency of “yo”	23/63 20.3%	5/26 19.2%	6/48 12.5%	2/18 11.1%	0

Analysis:

In this section, I will first present examples where the information is given by speaker, and then discuss examples where information is given by addressee or is already shared between the speaker and the addressee.

1. The first two examples present situations where the source of information is the speaker.

Excerpt 1

102 U: katei kyōshi ja nai kara, kon nani hitorihitori ni jikan o tsukau wake ikanai no **yo!** Ore kore kara
103 goingu no ban no **yo**.
104 A: hahaha iya, dakara chotto mou: hayaku hayaku, mou yukkuri sasete kurenai no?

U: I'm not your personal teacher! I can't spend so much time on each of you like this **yo!** I have to go to “Going(another TV show)” after this one **yo!**

A: hahaha, so, just a little, well, it's fast, fast, can you just give me more time on this?

In Line 102 and 103, Ueda uses “yo” to inform Arita that he can’t spend time talking with each of them like this, and he has another show after this one. Both Ueda’s personal feeling and his schedule is information in his own territory, and by using “yo”, he wants to make sure that Arita receives this new information and understands it. In addition to request for confirmation, the “yo” here also implies an illocutionary act(Cho, 2000), that Arita should give the answer quickly. The reception of this illocutionary act can be confirmed when Arita then offers an acknowledge response in Line 104. By saying “yukkuri sasete kurenai no?”, he indicates though he refuses Ueda’s request, he does understand it is an request of answering faster.

Excerpt 2

130 K: dou? Nitere wa. Taihen?
131 U: iya, nitere wa hontō gara:: tto shiteru **yo**.
132 K: unn so nan da::

K: How is Nitere (Nippon Television)? Are you having a hard time there?

U: Well, Nitere is really, like completely vacant **yo**.

K: Ok I see.

In Line 130, Ken asks about the condition in Nippon Television building. As a response, Ueda in Line 131 uses “yo” to mark and to emphasize the new information he is going to offer, that the building is completely vacant. This is a description of the third party (Nitere), from the perspective of the speaker. Since it is the question asked by Ken to request answer, so the new information belongs to Ueda’s territory. Thus in Line 132, Ken gives an acknowledge response, confirming he has received and understood the information, by saying “un”.

2. Then this paper will analyze examples where information is given by addressee or is already shared between the speaker and the addressee.

Excerpt 3

65 U: [ima shigoto dakara mou, chinamini ima nanbon nonden no?
66 A: ima wa mou kan bīru:: shichihachi hon gurai=
67 U: =nomisugi da **yo!** na. mou dekiagattete kakko no kioku nanka nan mo nee darō?

U: I am doing my job here. By the way, how much have you drunk?

A: Now, as for the canned beer, I think it about 7 or 8.

U: You are drinking too much **yo**. You are so drunk that you can't remember anything, aren't you?

In Line 65, Ueda asks how much has Arita drunk, and Arita answers in Line 66 that he has already drunk 7 or 8 cans of beer. Based on that information, Ueda blamed Arita for drinking too much in Line 67. The information of drinking “too much” is just given to Ueda, so the “information state” theory doesn’t quite explain the use of “yo” here. However, regarding to his personal attitude towards the issue of drinking too much, Ueda does have more expertise. While Arita doesn’t think he has done anything wrong, Ueda points out that Arita may not be able to answer his question right now. The “yo” here emphasizes the different attitude Ueda has on that issue of Arita’s drinking and blames him for drinking in daytime.

Excerpt 4

45 U: (laughter)gomennasai, jya soko m-mikōkai supesharu de, soko nagashitoku wa.
46 J: soko nagashitoite kure **yo**, tanomu wa.

U: I apologize. Well, there will be an unpublished special program, I will put those footage there.

J: Play those footage there **yo**, Please.

In Line 46, Jun is asking Ueda to play his footage in special program. They have already mentioned about footage and special program in previous lines, and the action of “playing footage” will be done by the addressee, so “yo” here doesn’t mark new information given by the speaker. The “yo” is used after a directive “kure”, which emphasizes the action of making a request, so instead of informing the addressee of new information, the speaker uses “yo” here to request addressee to make certain actions.

To conclude, in Excerpt 1&2, where information comes from the speaker, “yo” is used to emphasize the information and to request confirmation of understanding. To confirm understanding, both addressee give acknowledge response after speaker’s use of “yo”. In Excerpt 3&4, where the information comes from the address or is already shared by the speaker and the addressee, “yo” is used to emphasize different opinions or to make certain request from the addressee.

In both situations, use of “yo” indicates disagreement or request, which are categorized as dispreferred and potentially threatening addressee’s negative face. People usually include hesitation or accounts before making the dispreferred utterance to avoid FTAs(Pillet-Shore, 2017). However, no examples in this data shows evidence of hesitation or delay before the use of “yo”, especially in Excerpt 3, where the “yo” utterance in Line 67 overlaps with Line 66. The use of “yo” indicates dispreferred actions, but those actions are done baldly in preferred turn-shapes. This pattern shows the speaker isn’t concerned about conducting FTAs,

which can be considered as an indication of their close relationship with each other, or the nature of their job as comedians.

3. Finally, this paper will analyze factors that may limit the use of “yo” in order to avoid FTAs if there is any.

Excerpt 5

33 U: a moshimoshi. (.).jun chan(.) nani shiten no? itsumo ie de?
34 J: meshi tsukuttari shiteru [**yo**].

U: Hello? Jun chan, what do you usually do at home?

J: I do some cooking.

Excerpt 6

115 U: ken chan?
116 K: a-a p-yonsu?

U: Hi Ken chan.

K: Is that pyonsu?

Excerpt 7

146 U: ano:, ueda dakedo.
147 T: (.).e? pyonsu?

U: Well, this is Ueda speaking.

T: Is that Pyonsu?

Based on Table 1, the conversation with highest frequency is the conversation between Ueda and Arita, who are partners while doing comedian performance for decades. As in Excerpt1, Their close relationship can be revealed as they are using “ore” and “omae” which is a very masculine form of first person pronoun and very casual form of second person pronoun, while addressing each other directly. In addition, all their conversations are done in casual plain forms.

The second, third and fourth most frequent use of “yo” are in conversations with Ken, Taizō and Jun. Their closeness can be indicated by the way they address each other. As in Excerpt7&8, in Line 33 and Line 115, Ueda addresses Jun and Ken with the suffix “chan”, which is a suffix often used to address children or young women. Here the “chan” indicates their close relationship. And in Line 116 and 147, both Ken and Taizō then call Ueda by

using his nickname “Pyonsu”. In addition, their conversations are all done in plain form and they use sometimes masculine first person pronoun ”ore” to refer to themselves.

These linguistic features also indicate the casual and close relationship among these 4 people.

Excerpt 8

199	F: ano:: horiuchi san to taizō san , arita san to boku , yonin de yatterun de,	
200	U: oo	
229	F: [hai. Shitsurei shima::su	
230	U: hai	F: Well, Horiken, Taizō, Arita and I are doing (a group chat).
	U: I see.	
	F: Ok, Bye.	
	U: All right.	

However, in the conversation with Fukuda, there is no use of “yo”. In this conversation, thought Ueda still uses “omae” to address Fukuda, Fukuda uses suffix “san”, which is much more polite than “chan” after everyone’s name as in Line 199, and uses “boku”, which is a less forceful first person pronoun to refer to himself. At the end, Fukuda uses a formal leave-take device “shitsurei shimasu” to finish the conversation in Line 229, with Ueda simply replying with “hai” in Line 230. Such difference in their way of ending the conversation indicates there may be hierarchical difference or their relationship is not as close as Ueda with the other hosts.

Conclusion

When the information is from the speaker, “yo” is used to highlight new information to make sure the addressee actually receive the information, so the conversation can continue. In order to confirm understanding the information, acknowledge response from the addressee is expected and often seen the conversation. While the information is in the addressee’s territory, “yo” is used by the speaker to emphasize different attitudes on the information given by addressee previously, or request certain changes in behavior from the addressee. In either situation, the addressee is being requested to make certain response or being judged on, while the speaker uses “yo” to show they are more expert in the content of conversation. In both situations, “yo” indicates dispreferred actions, and the addressee’s negative face is potentially threatened.

Based on the analysis of frequency of “yo” and level of closeness between participants in the conversation, it can be concluded that since “yo” potentially leads to FTAs, it is more

likely to be used when the participants in the conversation with an informal tone or when there is no indication of hierarchy.

Finally, based on the nature of the data as excerpts from a comedy variety show, all the “yo”s in the excerpts are dispreferred actions presented in a preferred turn-shape. No one shows dissatisfaction with the use of “yo”, and the conversation continues smoothly. This indicates if used properly, “yo” can also be used to potentially present a conversationally close and humorous tone in particular circumstances.

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